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Sexism, Language and Social Change

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The United States Department of Labor has revised the Dictionary of Occupational Titles in order to eliminate references to gender. Can language respond to official edicts, as well as to demands from feminists, and effect significant changes? This paper supports the position that language can and will change. The basis for such change rests on three aspects of linguistic theory: the structure of language, change processes, and the relationship between thought and language.

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In 1975, the United States Department of Labor issued a revision to the Dictionary of Occupational Titles.[1] The revisions conformed to recent government policy statements on equal employment opportunities. Since previous job titles were considered discriminatory against women, sex stereotyped terms, such as man, woman, lady, or the suffix --ess were removed and titles changed to neutral forms. Policman was changed to police officer, salesman to sales agent and airplane stewardess to airplane flight attendant. Nearly 3,500 job titles were revised to eliminate references to sex or age.

In addition to these changes the Manpower Administration changed its own name to Employment and Training Administration. The official publication of the agency was changed from Manpower to Worklife, recognizing that Manpower excluded the sizable workforce of women.

Conflicting Arguments

This event can be viewed from two points of view. From the current feminist perspective, it is argued that the English language is sexist in so far as it relegates women to a secondary and inferior status in society. The claim that words such as mankind, man and he are generic and

include female as well as male is rejected on the grounds that the female identity is subsumed in the male form. Since language conveys ideas and a world view, the clear message of the words is that women are less significant than men and need not be mentioned as an identifiable group. The female role as subordinate is confirmed in the language. From the feminist perspective, not only is the generic term man not inclusive of women on an equal plane with men but the frequency with which jobs are listed in male forms, such as foreman and master intentionally excluded women in fact as well as form. Therefore, a linguistic form is required that corresponds to the rising consciousness of women as having equal potential with men. Such a form would also reflect their determination to broaden their economic and social roles.

Feminists argue that new forms of language such as chairperson and humankind, are prerequisites to the further development of new social attitudes to accompany changing roles. Since children learn about society from language, it is an easy lesson for girls to learn that many situations, described by male-identified words, do not include them. Implicit in the omission is the understanding that a large portion of the world is inappropriate for them. Boys, of course, learn the same lesson. Language serves

in this way to stereotype areas of interest and activity. Feminists, male and female alike, insist that free entry into intellectual, political, economic and sports activities necessitates changes in social attitudes. The changes can be encouraged or impeded by language.

From the perspective of those persons who wish to retain the conventional forms, language cannot be changed by edicts which reflect current and changing ideologies. It is one matter for women to desire economic and social equality with men and another to do violence to the language in order to achieve that goal. Words such as mankind and man, it is argued, are understood by all persons to be generic and are acceptable for their ease of communication. Only endless repetition and confusion can result from introducing new words such as chairperson. Only monotony results from the need to write men and women or he and she when the conventional man and he will do. It is further asserted language has its own rules that need to be obeyed. In addition, no edict issued by any government agency will change the habits of language and that people will continue to use the term, deliveryman, even when a woman drives the truck and delivers the parcels.

Why Language Can and Will Change

This paper supports the position that language can and will change to reflect emerging social conditions. The rationale for the argument derives from three aspects of language theory; the structure of language, the process of change, and the relationship between thought and language.

Language Structure

Recent developments in linguistics offer a framework for understanding how language is used. Transformational generative theorists have formulated concepts with which to analyze basic structures and relationships in language. Their studies of language as a universal human behavior clarify the ways in which individuals and groups use language. Generative linguists propose concepts of deep and surface structure and help to explain the process of choice of the various language elements in use. The deep structure contains basic elements, theoretically universal, from which features for the production of surface forms are selected. In an important sense, the elements in the deep structures represent concepts perceived by the mind. The way statements are made about such concepts are the

results of application of rules, some required and others optional. The statements in speech or writing represent the surface structure. In other words, language has at least three strata. One represents the perception of reality, a second contains the linguistic rules that translate that reality and a third is the outward display which results from the rules in speech or writing.

It is fairly simple to illustrate the process with grammar rules. In the deep structure there are elements such as nouns. Each noun carries an option for expressing it in plural terms. This option may be exercised in various ways. For example,words such as, desk, teacher, and sheep represent concepts which may be expressed as plurals. In English an /s/ sound is added in speech, the surface structure, to refer to more than one desk, a /z/ sound for more than one teacher, and no sound at all for more than one sheep. Whichever option is chosen, the underlying concept is the same. Every group of language users decides on rules for expressing the concept.

Semantic rules for choices of words are also derived from deep structure but the process is more complex. The basic meanings of words must be identified to account for the interdependence of lexical items with rules of grammar. One approach to defining words[2] is to mark each in a

binary system with a plus or minus for certain features. Teacher would be marked as + noun, + animate, and + human. These feature markings determine the selection of verbs and other categories of words which have similar markers and thus the rules of grammar for permissible sentences are generated. Desk would be marked as + noun, - animate, and of course, - human. With these markers the grammar rules would prevent selection of verbs such as speak and dance as actions or experiences of a desk.

Are there sex-identification markers in deep structure? Yes, but only for those words which have inherent sex meanings. Thus words such as woman and man would be marked not only as human but also female and male. Once a word is marked for a feature in its underlying meaning, certain restrictions automatically apply for the use of the words. A sentence, The man menstruated, would not be permissible because menstruate would be marked for the female in the deep structure.

The Department of Labor's decision to change terminology evidently reflects the idea that if there is no underlying sex marker in a semantic term, then sex features should not be added in the surface structure. In other words, the linguistic option is limited. Imposing sex features on words which have no inherent sex meanings

can produce anomalous sentences. For example, My sister is a cameraman in a television show is grammatically questionable. Sister and man have different underlying meanings.

It can be argued that while man is marked for male in deep structure, common practice (which represents surface structure) is to use it either for male or both male and female. Since the function of linguistics is to describe language and not prescribe its use, all that is needed is a description of an optional rule for the use of certain words, such as cameraman and sister. The availability of options fits linguistic theory. However, if that practice is adopted, it should be recognized that an option is being exercised and that a new grammatical rule is in effect.

Contemporary social changes do seem to require language changes in either rules of grammar or the lexicon. The semantic change seems simpler. It would contribute to clarity of communication. Since situations in which man does refer only to males are changing, the use of the term becomes less accurate. Clear communication is facilitated when each word has a single meaning.

Language Change

Can a government agency's edict change word usage? Historically, people have changed word meanings. In one kind of change the meanings have been elevated or degraded. Knight was once used for people who were not very important; now it describes a hero. Villain once referred to a country house or villa, with none of the pejorative connotations of contemporary use. Local options may also vary in a given historical perios. Homely means plain in North America but remains synonomous with homey in England.

The reasons for change are not certain. Some shifts seem to result from contact among people who speak different languages (as sandwich in French), others from cultural developments requiring new vocabulary (as astronauts and hippie). The processes of change are not clear either. The only predicable feature of the processes is that they do occur.

Whether or not a government agency can change common usage of words is problemmatical. The dramatic cultural events attendant on astronaut and hippie brought those words into common usage quickly. Of course, there were none of the political resistances which now accompany the changing status of women. On the other hand, the government's vocabulary change is accompanied by relatively rapid cultural changes. Women are bing admitted to positions in schools, government, and business from which they were only recently excluded. Although the changes for women are more dramatic,

new roles are opening for men also.

Language and Thought

The third issue for discussion of the argument is addressed to the relationship between language and thinking. The central question here is whether language reflects a person's perception of reality or causes perception. The psychologist James Deese [3] argues that the information coded into lexical entries represents the impression of experience on a cognitive category. Experience itself is, in turn, the result of the impressions of perceptions on information received. Certainly, people's selection of the changed and new words in the preceding paragraphs represents experience and psychological perception. The word driver, for instance, would not be used to refer to the astronaut in a speace ship. A new cognitive category relating to space has been created by experience.

The Labor Department's change in terminology supports the "Whorfian hypothesis." Whorf, a linguistic scholar, viewed language as a determiner of experience.[4] He thought, for example, that since Eskimos have more words for snow than Americans do, they perceive more distinctions in the texture of snow. Slobin[5] a contemporary linguist, agrees that language may covertly bring us to pay attention

to attributes of a situation. However, he prefers the weaker form of theorizing which most people accept. That is, thw availability of specific words in a particular language makes perceptions and expressions easier. Slobin points out that word combinations emerge when people in a language group do not have singe words to express new concepts. The words humankind and chair person appear to represent such lexical combinations.

A Change in language, then, can make it easier to perceive of women in a larger array of roles than have historically been available to them. A policy that "all men are created equal" appears on its surface to exclude women from equal rights under law. In fact, historically, women have not been afforded equal protection as citizens. Discrimination in employment and in property ownership still exists although the practices are changing. The semantic selections available can broaden perceived opportunities. An advertisement for a mailman appears to be directed to men; an ad for a mail carrier conveys no such restriction. An invitation for nominations for a chairman requires second thoughts about whether or not a woman's name may be offered; if a chairperson is to be

elected, there is no doubt. It should be noted that changes in popular vocabulary affect both men and women. If consumers are the target population of a food producer, meen need not hesitate to make a purchase.

Guidelines for Writers

At the same time that the Department of Labor has issued its revision of occupational titles, publishers have gone further in proposing changes. Scott, Foresman[6] and McGraw Hill [7], for example, have formulated guidelines to writers directing them to change their language to recognize the changing status of women. The publishers' recommendations are specific. Women are no longer to be omitted from participation in various human activities. Thus, terms like early man, business man, the typical motorist...he, are to be replaced by early humans, business men and women, and the typical motorist...he or she. Women will no longer be typecast in roles but will be presented as lawyers and judges, not only as secretaries or social workers; as doctors, not always as nurses; as principals, not always as teachers. Women will not be demeaned as relying only on male initiative. Phrases such as worker and his wife will be replace by a working

couple. Patronizing words will be eliminated so that references to a lady professor, the little women, the astronomer Galileo and the beautiful Marie Curie will be rephrased to read a professor, women, the astronomer Galileo and the chemist Curie. The integrity of characteristics of persons in history and in fiction will be maintained but authors are urged to examine their work to avoid stereotypes. They are asked to portray strengths and weaknesses as human qualities and not as typical of either men or women. Not only Henry but Mary, also, will appear as a wise person in a town, a dynamic captain of a team, a fair-minded president of a club, a courageous leader of a social movement. Attributes which our society considers unhealthy or irritating will be presented in either males or females. That is, either John or Sara may be timid, uncertain, weak, or talkative.

Conclusion

There is compelling support for the argument to change language to eliminate sexism. In linguistic theory there is the concept that language has a deep structure level in which basic meanings are generated. In surface structure forms, the speech and writing used to express these meanings,

required and optional rules are applied. It was suggested that grammatical and semantic consistencies can be maintained between underlying meanings and surface forms if no sex features are added to words which have no inherent sex characteristics. The history of language demonstrates that language does change and that the changes reflect new concepts and social events. Since cultural changes are occurring, as indicated in the increasing numbers of women in nontraditional roles such as telephone repairers, and tool and die makers, it can be expected that new language forms will emerge. The prediction is reinforced by the changing roles of men in both occupational activities and involvement in parenting and household work. Finally, there is a relationship between language and thinking. While a cause-effect relation has not been established, there is enough evidence that language usage shapes thoughts, so that at least one government agency, major publishing companies, and many women and men are in the process of changing language to eliminate sexism.

Footnotes

[1]U.S. Department of Labor, Manpower Administration. Job Title Revisions to Eliminate Sex and Age Referent Language From the Dictionary of Occupational Titles, Third Edition. Washington, D. C.:U.S. Government Printing Office, 1975.

[2]Noam Chomsky, Aspects of the Theory of Syntax, Cambridge: M.I.T.Press, 1965.

[3]James Deese, "Cognitive Structure and Affect in Language," Communication and Affect, ed. P. Pliner, L. Krames, and T. Alloway, N.Y.: Academic Press, 1973.

[4]Benjamin L. Whorf, Language Thought and Reality, Mass:M.I.T. Press, 1956.

[5]Dan I. Slobin, Psycholinguistics, ILL: Scott, Foresman, 1971.

[6]Scott, Foresman Committee on Sexism in Textbooks, Guidelines For Improving the Image of Women in Textbooks, Ill: Scott, Foresman, 1972.

[7]McGraw Hill, Guidelines for Equal Treatment of the Sexes in McGraw-Hill Book Company Publications, New York:McGraw-Hill, 1974.